

Jorge Luis Córdova-Díaz

1907–1994

RESIDENT COMMISSIONER 1969–1973
NEW PROGRESSIVE FROM PUERTO RICO

In just one term, Jorge Luis Córdova-Díaz, a lifelong proponent of Puerto Rican statehood, did more to transform the office of Resident Commissioner than nearly all of his predecessors, including his father, Resident Commissioner Félix Córdova Dávila. In 1970 as the House overhauled its rules and procedures, Córdova-Díaz pushed for and won the right to vote in committee. Though still prohibited from voting on the floor, the Resident Commissioner was able for the first time to influence the national lawmaking process. Bolstered by his landmark legislation, Córdova-Díaz did everything he could to strengthen federal programs on the island, and his tireless work won him respect from the Caribbean to Washington. “Mr. Córdova is present on the floor of the House more than most other Members,” said Republican Robert McClory of Illinois in 1970, “and he is a most articulate and knowledgeable representative” of Puerto Rico’s diverse interests.¹

Córdova-Díaz was born in Manatí, Puerto Rico, on April 20, 1907, to Félix Córdova Dávila and Mercedes Díaz. As a boy, he attended the island’s public schools, where he learned English. When Jorge Luis was 10, his father was elected Resident Commissioner to the U.S. House of Representatives, and in 1917 the Córdova-Díaz family moved to Washington, D.C., where Jorge Luis enrolled in the city’s schools. The Resident Commissioner allowed his family to speak only Spanish at home, and Córdova-Díaz’s bilingualism was the start of his political education.² Early on, he wrote speeches in English for his father, accompanying him to House sessions during the Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover administrations.³ He remained in the nation’s capital for college, graduating with an A.B. from The Catholic University of America in 1928 and earning a law degree from Harvard University in 1931. Like his father, Córdova-

Díaz returned to Puerto Rico and practiced law, until 1940, when he was selected to the supreme court of San Juan. In 1945 he was appointed to the bench of the supreme court of Puerto Rico, a move Resident Commissioner Jesús T. Piñero of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party or PPD) adamantly opposed for political reasons.⁴ Córdova-Díaz sat on the island’s bench until 1946. He and his wife, Dora Rodríguez, had four children: Jorge Luis, Jr.; Elvira; Irene; and Fernando.⁵

Córdova-Díaz was a loyal advocate for statehood, but during the buildup to the election of 1960, he helped found the Partido Acción Cristiana (Christian Action Party, or PAC), whose ranks included individuals frustrated by “a government-sponsored recession of morality and spirituality.”⁶ Church officials quickly adopted the party’s mantra.⁷ Though they reassured the public that its involvement would not violate the separation of church and state, many voters were soon unable “to distinguish between clerical objectives and the broader aspects of the PAC program,” asserts one historian.⁸ Like many third parties, the PAC was short-lived. But in 1960 Córdova-Díaz ran as its candidate for Resident Commissioner, placing a distant third with roughly 7 percent of the vote, well behind the victor, Antonio Fernós-Isern of the Partido Popular Democrático.⁹ After the election, Córdova-Díaz turned his attention back to Puerto Rican statehood. As a founding member of the nonpartisan Citizens for State 51, he was eventually catapulted back into the island’s political scene.

Not long afterward, Córdova-Díaz joined up with members of the Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party, or PNP), a pro-statehood faction that was sensitive to the ambitions of the island’s booming middle class.¹⁰ In 1968 the PNP nominated him for Resident Commissioner. With the incumbent Resident Commissioner, Santiago Polanco-Abreu of the PPD,



dividing his time between Puerto Rico and Washington, Córdova-Díaz had a slight advantage during the campaign. Also in his favor, the PPD was in the middle of an identity crisis, struggling to craft an agenda after longtime party leaders had begun stepping aside.¹¹

The 1968 campaign was about form as much as function; the dominant issue was the role of the Resident Commissioner. For the last four years, the PPD had emphasized that the nonvoting position reflected the island's unique status as a commonwealth. But the PNP wanted the Resident Commissioner to have more responsibility, like the other Members.¹² While Polanco-Abreu prioritized committee hearings and legislation that dealt explicitly with Puerto Rico, Córdova-Díaz promised to "share in the concern not only for national and international problems but also for local matters affecting other congressmen."¹³ By inserting Puerto Rico's interests into an array of mainland concerns, he planned to compensate for the Resident Commissioner's inability to vote on national legislation. Supporting certain bills would give him more clout when he asked for help concerning "the problems affecting Puerto Rico," he explained.¹⁴

Regarding Puerto Rico's problems, Córdova-Díaz echoed the PNP's general platform, taking a long-term approach to the status question. Anticipating congressional resistance, he promised the party would not "ask Congress for statehood until the people have had an opportunity to decide for themselves in a plebiscite or a referendum."¹⁵ With a healthy respect for the island's economy, which was becoming increasingly industrial, Córdova-Díaz favored a staggered revenue program—with various rates assigned to different sectors of the financial system—forcing the businesses with the lowest rates to abide by federal minimum wage laws. Also hoping to diversify the island's agricultural production, he asked farmers to give goods for local markets priority over exports of sugar and tobacco.¹⁶

On Election Day the PNP clinched a signal victory, taking the governorship, the office of Resident Commissioner, the Puerto Rican house, and the San Juan mayor's office. Pundits struggled to make sense of the results: "The enormity of what happened here

Tuesday night is still sinking in," wrote the editors of the *San Juan Star*. "The depth and desire for change in the Puerto Rican electorate was underestimated by all the politicians." Córdova-Díaz edged out Polanco-Abreu in the general election by 2 points, taking 43.8 percent of the vote. "We think Jorge Luis Cordova Diaz ... will be an excellent representative for the island in Washington. He is an outstanding lawyer, completely bilingual, and he understand[s] Washington," the editorial continued.¹⁷ Córdova-Díaz's victory was a long time in the making, coming after nearly 30 years of one-party control. "I feel great joy and satisfaction in seeing that at last my people have awakened and have started to practice democracy," Córdova-Díaz said.¹⁸ He promised to consult PPD leaders before taking action on certain pieces of legislation.¹⁹

Like the election, the transition for the new Resident Commissioner was cordial. Polanco-Abreu congratulated Córdova-Díaz and briefed the new Resident Commissioner and his staff when they visited Washington after the election. Also, Polanco-Abreu promised to introduce Córdova-Díaz later in the year to his new responsibilities and House colleagues, a courtesy he had not been shown by his predecessor.²⁰

In the House, Córdova-Díaz was aligned with the Democrats at the start of the 91st Congress (1969–1971), sitting on their side of the chamber and being formally included on the Democratic committee rosters.²¹ With the exception of his pro-statehood stance, much of his agenda echoed his PPD predecessors'. Like them, he was sent to Congress to ensure that Puerto Rico received its share of aid from the federal government, an assignment that grew increasingly difficult amid the island's growing prosperity.²² He was placed on the Agriculture, Armed Services, and Interior and Insular Affairs Committees. These assignments, which symbolized Puerto Rico's main legislative concerns, were traditionally given to the Resident Commissioner, but since Córdova-Díaz could neither vote nor accrue seniority in committee, he was an observer more than anything else.²³ Córdova-Díaz nevertheless maintained a furious work schedule, beginning his day by attending the congressional prayer

breakfast with Members from both parties before logging a reported 16 hours at his office.²⁴ “I’m in the chamber, in the dining room, in the different groups up here,” he said.²⁵

Córdova-Díaz’s tenure in Washington coincided with a major effort to reform the structure of the House, and he took advantage of this internal push for greater accountability by leveraging an amendment to the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 (H.R. 17654) to win the right to vote in committee. The *Washington Post* highlighted Córdova-Díaz’s daily frustrations, and he used the publicity to lobby for reforms.²⁶ In September he made good on a campaign promise, introducing a revision to House Rule XII during debate on the Legislative Reorganization Act. The revision allowed the Resident Commissioner to “be elected to serve on standing committees in the same manner as Members of the House and ... possess in such committees the same powers and privileges as the other Members.”²⁷ To Córdova-Díaz’s surprise, Members from both sides supported the measure. “Let us take away a paper title and afford him the opportunity to voice the aspirations and hopes of his people,” said Democrat Shirley Chisholm of New York. “This is an important and necessary change in the rules of this body,” responded Ohio Republican Clarence Miller.²⁸ Despite the measure’s success in the House, Córdova-Díaz felt sure it would fail in the Senate. “I can’t complain that I’ve been ignored,” he said after the House vote, “but I feel if the bill is passed [by the Senate] the chances are better that I’ll be listened to. These department heads are well aware that I haven’t had the vote and now they’ll realize that someday they might need me. So I feel they’ll be more responsive when I ask them for something.”²⁹ With the Senate’s passage of the amendment in early October, the office of Resident Commissioner became more powerful than ever before.³⁰

At the start of the 92nd Congress (1971–1973), Córdova-Díaz was appointed to the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. His assignments to three subcommittees—Mines and Mining, National Parks and Recreation, and Territories—illustrated his efforts to involve himself as Resident Commissioner in the daily business

of the House.³¹ Córdova-Díaz rarely missed a hearing or a markup session, and his new ability to vote in committee necessitated his identification with a party. Córdova-Díaz chose to align himself with Republicans, who rewarded him with a seat in the party caucus in 1971. The PNP had no national affiliation, but with the upcoming election against the resurgent PPD, any affiliation with House Democrats could become a political liability.³² Democratic freshman Herman Badillo, a Puerto Rican-born Member from New York City, criticized Córdova-Díaz’s decision, arguing in island newspapers that he had further relinquished power in a Democratic-controlled House, but Ron de Lugo, the new Democratic Delegate from the Virgin Islands, was more sympathetic. “I don’t know what else he could have done,” he said.³³

As a member of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, Córdova-Díaz was in a good position to advocate for funding for Puerto Rico. The existing laws prevented Congress from appropriating money to U.S. territories as it did to states, and since Puerto Ricans paid no federal income tax, many Members of Congress felt the practice was justified. In perhaps his most persistent legislative effort, Córdova-Díaz helped convince his colleagues to change this arrangement. During debate on the Economic Opportunity Act (S. 2007), Republican William Steiger of Wisconsin introduced an amendment as part of H.R. 10351 that would prioritize federal programs on the mainland and provide funding for territories only if there was a surplus. Córdova-Díaz immediately substituted his amendment “to place Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands in the same position as States.” Córdova-Díaz’s amendment garnered bipartisan support and passed the House 202 to 161 in a teller vote. Córdova-Díaz reported feeling “wonderful.” “It’s the most amazing success I’ve had yet in Congress,” he said, “even more than getting the right to vote in committee.”³⁴ But President Richard M. Nixon vetoed the final version of the legislation because he opposed the appropriation of nearly \$2 billion for child development programs.³⁵ Long a supporter of Puerto Rican statehood, Córdova-Díaz viewed the veto as a “severe blow” and a major disappointment.³⁶

Córdova-Díaz's four years in office were marked by increasingly unstable conditions in Puerto Rico: a sliding economy, rising prices, government corruption, and violence in the labor force.³⁷ The political atmosphere in 1972 was so toxic that San Juan's leading English-language newspaper refused to endorse candidates from either party. "The political process in Puerto Rico has been demeaned to a dangerously low point, there has been a grave clogging of public business, and grievous injury has been inflicted on the Puerto Rican spirit," said an editorial on the front page of the *San Juan Star*. "Puerto Rico cannot afford four more years like the past four years, from either the standpoint of programs to meet demands or from the damage done to a people's conception of itself."³⁸

While voters directed much of their animosity toward the gubernatorial candidates, Córdova-Díaz found the race to be closer than he expected. He was renominated for Resident Commissioner and faced PPD candidate Jaime Benítez in the general election. After the House adjourned in mid-October, Córdova-Díaz returned to Puerto Rico to campaign, only weeks before the election. He kept his focus small and tried "to run a more personal campaign," visiting towns and communities scattered throughout the island.³⁹ Córdova-Díaz supported Puerto Rico's full participation in federal housing and welfare programs and remained a steadfast proponent of statehood.⁴⁰ Supporters praised his "caliber and sincerity" and commended his reform efforts in Washington.⁴¹ While both candidates supported federal initiatives in Puerto Rico, Benítez reignited a 1968 debate when he announced, "The greatest strength of the Resident Commissioner in the United States lies in his own exceptional and peculiar responsibility."⁴² While Córdova-Díaz had won concessions from Congress during the last four years, Benítez, like many in the PPD, sought to redirect federal policy by emphasizing Puerto Rico's unique position as a free and associated commonwealth.

Nearly 1.3 million people voted in the 1972 general election, and when the ballots were tallied, Córdova-Díaz had lost by more than 7 percent.⁴³ His association with an island administration that many considered corrupt

weighed heavily on his chances for re-election, adding to the general pro-commonwealth sentiment.⁴⁴

After his defeat, Córdova-Díaz returned to Puerto Rico. On September 18, 1994, he died at his home in Guaynabo at age 87.⁴⁵ In the House of Representatives Córdova-Díaz was remembered as "Don Jorge," a "distinguished leader" who "epitomized the virtues of a dedicated public servant."⁴⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Jorge Luis Córdova-Díaz," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 91st Cong., 2nd sess. (15 September 1970): 31849.
- 2 Robert L. Asher, "'Congressman' without a Vote," 26 July 1970, *Washington Post*: B6; Harry Turner, "Cordova Diaz Pays Visit to Capitol," 6 December 1968, *San Juan Star*: 32; Marty Gerard Delfin, "Cordova Diaz, Former Resident Commissioner, Dies in Guaynabo," 18 September 1994, *San Juan Star*: 8.
- 3 Turner, "Córdova Díaz Pays Visit to Capitol": 32; Harry Turner, "Cordova Diaz Takes Oath for Washington Post," 4 January 1969, *San Juan Star*: 3.
- 4 Charles McCabe, "Sólo Piñero ha pedido ser oído sobre Córdova," 1 November 1945, *El mundo*: 1. Hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, *Nomination of Jorge Luis Cordova Diaz*, 79th Cong., 1st sess. (7 November 1945): 2–12.
- 5 *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (26 September 1994): 25807.
- 6 As quoted in Jerome Fischman, "The Church in Politics: The 1960 Election in Puerto Rico," *Western Political Quarterly* 18 (December 1965): 821; "Jorge Luis Cordova Diaz," 22 September 1994, *Washington Post*: C5.
- 7 A. W. Maldonado, "Governor Scores 4th Straight Win," 9 November 1960, *San Juan Star*: 1.
- 8 Fischman, "The Church in Politics": 825, 828.
- 9 This publication reflects his official name at the time of his first election in 1968: Jorge Luis Córdova-Díaz. During his one term in the House (1969–1973), he served under the name Jorge L. Córdova, which is how it appears in the *Congressional Directory* and the *Congressional Record*. "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 10 For information on the PNP, see César Ayala and Rafael Bernabe,

- Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 224–226; Dimas Planas, “Where Does the PDP Go from Here?,” 8 November 1968, *San Juan Star*: 30.
- 11 Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*: 226.
 - 12 Harry Turner, “Polanco in Congress,” 23 October 1968, *San Juan Star*: 25.
 - 13 Harry Turner, “Cordova Diaz Talks of ‘New Approach,’” 5 December 1968, *San Juan Star*: 1.
 - 14 “Polanco Won’t Talk about Ferre Taxes,” 1 November 1968, *San Juan Star*: 6.
 - 15 Frank Ramos, “Cordova Diaz Predicts Stall in Status Vote,” 15 November 1968, *San Juan Star*: 1.
 - 16 Ramos, “Cordova Diaz Predicts Stall in Status Vote.”
 - 17 “Depth of Change,” 7 November 1968, *San Juan Star*: 29.
 - 18 Pedro Roman, “Cordova Sees NPP Win Signaling End to ‘One Man Rule,’” 7 November 1968, *San Juan Star*: 6.
 - 19 Turner, “Cordova Diaz Talks of ‘New Approach.’”
 - 20 Harry Turner, “Polanco Salutes Ferre, But Also Criticizes Him,” 12 November 1968, *San Juan Star*: 3.
 - 21 Turner, “Cordova Diaz Takes Oath for Washington Post.”
 - 22 An editorial in the *San Juan Star* pointed out, “As Puerto Rico’s prosperity increases it is becoming more difficult in Washington to convince congressmen of the continuing need for help and special understanding of the island’s problems.” See “New Approach,” 6 December 1968, *San Juan Star*: 39.
 - 23 Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947–1992* Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1994): 192.
 - 24 *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (26 September 1994): 25807; Ralph Nader Congress Project, *Citizens Look at Congress: Jorge L. Córdova, Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico* (Washington, D.C.: Grossman Publishers, 1972): 1.
 - 25 Asher, “‘Congressman’ without a Vote.”
 - 26 Robert F. Levey, “A Nonvoting Delegate Tells of His Frustrations on Hill,” 5 April 1970, *Washington Post*: 53; Asher, “‘Congressman’ without a Vote.”
 - 27 *Congressional Record*, House, 91st Cong. 2nd sess. (15 September 1970): 31848.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, 31852.
 - 29 Despite the prospect of obtaining Córdova-Díaz’s support, some outspoken Members opposed the plan. Córdova-Díaz believed the problem was that his winning the right to vote in committee would set a precedent, making it easier for the Delegate from the District of Columbia “to attain a similar status” against the wishes of other Members in the House. George Gedda, “House Gives P.R. Commissioner Vote,” 16 September 1970, *San Juan Star*: 1.
 - 30 For an early treatment of what one historian calls the “Córdova Amendment,” see William R. Tansill, “The Resident Commissioner to the United States from Puerto Rico: An Historical Perspective,” *Revista jurídica de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* 47 (No. 1–2, 1978): 83, 98–100.
 - 31 Ralph Nader Congress Project, *Citizens Look at Congress: Jorge L. Córdova, Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico*: 7.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, 6–7.
 - 33 *Ibid.*, 6.
 - 34 Ed Konstant, “Cordova Nips Poverty Aid Cutback Bid,” 1 October 1971, *San Juan Star*: 3; “To the Rescue,” 1 October 1971, *San Juan Star*: 27. See also Ralph Nader Congress Project, *Citizens Look at Congress: Jorge L. Córdova, Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico*: 8.
 - 35 “President Vetoes Bill on Child Care,” 10 October 1971, *San Juan Star*: 20.
 - 36 “Cordova Calls OEO Bill Veto Severe Blow to Puerto Rico,” 12 December 1971, *San Juan Star*: 3.
 - 37 Fernando Bayron Toro, *Elecciones y los partidos políticos de Puerto Rico, 1809–2000* (Mayagüez: Editorial Isla, 2003): 253.
 - 38 “An Editorial: Our Position,” 3 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: 1, 38.
 - 39 Ed Konstant, “Cordova Sees Sure Win for NPP in Nov.,” 8 October 1972, *San Juan Star*: 6.
 - 40 “Resident Commissioner, Questions and Answers,” 5 November 1972, *San Juan Star Sunday Magazine*: S-7.
 - 41 Dimas Planas, “An Easy Choice,” 4 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: 46.
 - 42 “Resident Commissioner, Questions and Answers.”
 - 43 Córdova-Díaz captured 560,119 votes (43.4 percent) versus Benítez’s 656,885 (50.9 percent). See “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
 - 44 Frank Ramos, “Downfall of the NPP,” 10 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: 25.
 - 45 “Deaths: Jorge Luis Cordova Diaz, Resident Commissioner,” 22 September 1994, *Washington Post*: C5.
 - 46 *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (26 September 1994): 25807.